

U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy Must Address Ideological and Political Factors at the Global and Local Levels

Although the U.S.-led global war on terrorism has had some notable successes—such as the destruction of al-Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan, the elimination of many of the group’s leaders, and the growing resolve of many countries to take action against al-Qaeda and its associates—no informed observers believe that al-Qaeda will be eradicated any time soon. Indeed, in some respects, al-Qaeda has metastasized into an even more formidable adversary, dispersed across the world, largely self-sustaining, and constantly adopting new and innovative tactics. The United States itself continues to be threatened by large-scale attacks. Thus, countering al-Qaeda is likely to preoccupy U.S. national security institutions for at least the remainder of this decade, and probably longer.

Global and Local Threats

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) studied the shape of future threats to the United States and U.S. security interests from terrorist and other extremist organizations. The study analyzed four sources or categories of threat:

- **Al-Qaeda** is an ideology-based, global movement whose paramount objectives are to mobilize Muslims for a worldwide jihad against the West and to topple “apostate” regimes. Its ideology is profoundly internationalist, attempting to contextualize local conflicts as part of the broader struggle. Successful attacks such as those of September 11, 2001, and a sophisticated media strategy have broadcast al-Qaeda’s message to Muslim communities around the world.
- **The “al-Qaeda nebula”** includes groups that may not be formally part of al-Qaeda but that have assimilated its worldview and the concept of mass-casualty terrorist attacks. These groups are concerned with both local and regional jihads, and they represent the center of gravity of the current global terrorist threat. An analytic framework developed by PAF captures key aspects of the relationship between the al-Qaeda core and other elements in the global jihadist movement.

Key findings

U.S. counterterrorism strategy should have three elements:

- **Attack the ideological underpinnings of global jihadism.**
- **Seek to sever the links—ideological and otherwise—between terrorist clusters and the global jihad.**
- **Strengthen the capabilities of frontline states and moderate civil society groups to counter local jihadist threats.**

- **Terrorist and insurgent groups without known links to al-Qaeda** have more limited aims and geographic scope, but they can threaten U.S. regional interests, friends, and allies. They include Islamic groups (e.g., Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas) as well as non-Islamic groups.
- **The nexus between terrorism and organized crime** poses a further challenge. Having lost the support of great powers since the end of the Cold War, terrorist and insurgent groups have sought funding through smuggling, arms trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, piracy, counterfeiting, and other criminal activities.

Defeating the global jihadist movement—which we define as al-Qaeda and its nebula—is the most pressing security challenge facing the United States today. But U.S. policymakers should not ignore the threat that local, unaffiliated groups pose. Clearly, al-Qaeda leaders hope that their efforts will persuade other Islamic militant groups to join the global jihad. From a policy perspective, the first-order question is whether insurgent or terrorist groups currently outside the global jihad will move closer to or farther away from that movement. Just because some of these groups have not joined does not mean that they should be dismissed; some local groups pose deadly threats to the states they seek to subvert, and others, like Hezbollah, could suddenly emerge as global concerns.

Moving Beyond Conventional Counterterrorism Strategy

No one tool is likely to be decisive against al-Qaeda. An effective strategy for countering and defeating the global jihadist movement will necessarily employ a complex mixture of

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military, intelligence, financial, political, legal, and even social instruments.

It follows that a comprehensive U.S. strategy needs to move beyond the boundaries of conventional counterterrorism theory and practice to address the ideological and political factors that motivate much of the threat. Such a strategy would have three main elements:

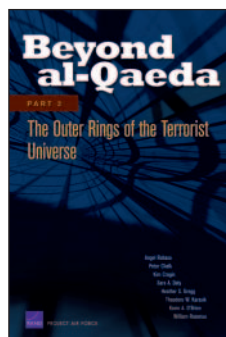
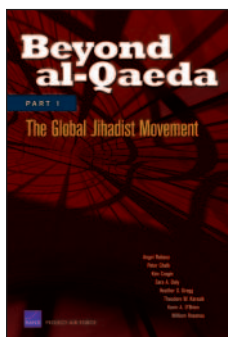
1. **Attack the ideological underpinnings of global jihadism.** The goal is to deny extremists the high ground of Islamic politico-religious discourse, which has been adroitly exploited by al-Qaeda to further the appeal of its own radical rhetoric. Prevailing in the war of ideas requires empowering moderate Muslims to counter the influence of the radicals. Preventing ideologues from continuing to provide justification for terrorism could expedite the movement's deterioration.
2. **Seek to sever the links—ideological and otherwise—between terrorist clusters and the global jihad.** Contradictions inevitably arise between the global vision

promulgated by global jihadist theoreticians and the national agendas that many local movements naturally pursue. Exploiting this friction hinges on decreasing the utility of the relationship with al-Qaeda for local groups. To achieve this goal, the United States will need to tailor the specific components of its counterterrorism policy to ensure that they are relevant to extant and emerging patterns of local and regional terrorism.

3. **Strengthen the capabilities of frontline states and moderate civil society groups to counter local jihadist threats.** The object is to deny al-Qaeda alternative sanctuaries and, over time, to reduce the clusters that comprise the global jihadist movement. These local wars have to be fought and won by local governments and security forces with the United States in a supporting role. For the U.S. military and the U.S. Air Force, new types of missions may require fusion, not only with other services, but with the security forces of cooperating countries. ■

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